

The Bernardsville News

Saying goodbye to the Bernardsville Coffee Shop

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EDITOR: This has become a summer of good-byes. Soon we'll be sending our eldest son, Sean, off to college, 850 miles away. A bittersweet farewell: I'll miss him terribly, yet I'm excited for him, his future.

I believed this would be my main transition during these hot days, but I was wrong. We recently learned that the Coffee Shop – a Bernardsville institution for 32 years – has sold. The news, not unexpected, felt like a jab to my gut.

Couldn't there please be more time?

My husband, Pat, and I became regulars at the Coffee Shop shortly after we moved to town, more than 20 years ago. From the start, it felt familiar. My grandfather owned a string of hamburger joints throughout New Jersey, and the Coffee Shop's Formica counter and red-vinyl spin stools resembled those I used to sit upon as a child, eating chocolate ice cream while my grandfather talked business.

The Coffee Shop owner, Jim Andronikou, reminds me of my beloved kin: hardworking and quiet, always getting the job done, whether chopping pickles or manning the deep fryer. It's a true family business, run with his daughters, Fro and Izzy.

After our first meal here, Pat and I waited in our booth for the bill. And waited. We didn't know the system – no dropped checks. You paid at the front, where everything was added up on an old register.

For years, it remained cash-only. Forget your wallet? No worries! Square the tab tomorrow. Early on, I mistakenly called our waitress, "Flo," the ditzy character from the sitcom about Mel's Diner. "I get that a lot," said Fro, with a laugh.

Over time, the Coffee Shop became our family's second kitchen. They fed me through both pregnancies, a Herculean task as my appetite grew finicky.

Then, at times, my days as a mom of two small sons stretched long. Grabbing a turkey club and grilled cheeses at the Coffee Shop filled our bellies, while a chat with Fro, who offered easygoing company, sustained my spirit.

Each time I picked up our youngest, Chris, from preschool, he told me exactly where he wanted to go: "Coffee Hop!" A feast of fluffy pancakes for my toddler guaranteed a nap on our short ride home. Tasty treats came in tall silver cups, deliciously thick vanilla milkshakes inside. After Pat's parents took our boys for lunch, they marveled, "It's like Sean and Chris were celebrities. Everyone knew them. They never ordered – their food magically appeared!"

A welcoming place, the Coffee Shop felt similar to the bar depicted on Cheers. There was Ernie, making cole slaw and talking soccer. Doris, a white-haired waitress who worked until her cancer diagnosis, smiled as she told stories about her son. And despite the pain in his knee, Ari spent long hours toiling at the hot griddle. Occasionally, there'd be a spectacular spat between the sisters, shouted in a mix of Greek, Spanish and English. Sometimes Izzy's young son, Joseph, sat with us, giggling and eating rice pudding.

Many times, as I tried to pay for a meal, Mr. Andronikou waved me away. Fro treated our boys on their birthdays, and they honored her with homemade Valentines.

Week after week, the Coffee Shop remained a constant for our family, a staple in our lives, the phone number on our speed dial. No menus needed. We knew breakfast was served all day and no chicken soup on Thursdays.

My boys' go-to became a bacon, egg and cheese on a hard roll. Meal upon meal stacked up over the years. We stopped after Little League games, Sundays before church, on snow days and lazy summer mornings. To-go orders grabbed on our way down the shore.

We wished they stayed open for dinner. As our boys started frequenting the restaurant on their own, I warned, “Behave as if dad and I were with you. Say please and thank you. These are our friends, our family, our people.”

And just as our sons changed over the years, so, too, did our small-town diner. Dishes were added, such as healthy salads and wraps. The home-fries became crisper. Credit cards now accepted. Wi-Fi. Walls were painted tan, booths re-covered and photos of Greece and old-school Bernardsville were hung.

No matter the improvements, the heart of the Coffee Shop stayed constant, thanks to the continuous presence of Mr. Andronikou and his daughters.

Soon, when we come home from taking Sean to college, there’ll be new owners of our favorite “greasy spoon.” We’re rooting for their success. And just as we’re excited for our son’s new adventure, we’re thrilled Mr. Andronikou can finally retire, and we can’t wait to hear about our friends’ next endeavors.

From our whole hearts, we wish Mr. Andronikou, Fro and Izzy all the best.

They’ve cared for our family for two decades, becoming loving fixtures in our everyday lives. It’s so hard to say good-bye.

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